

# SUICIDE PREVENTION POLICY

## VISTA OAKS STUDENT AND INSTRUCTION POLICY #3.11

**ADOPTED: 1/26/2015**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to protect the health and well being of all Vista Oaks Charter School (VOCS) students by having procedures in place to prevent, assess the risk of, intervene in, and respond to suicide. VOCS:

- Recognizes that physical, behavioral, and emotional health is an integral component of a student's educational outcome;
- Further recognizes that suicide is a leading cause of death among young people;
- Has an ethical responsibility to take a proactive approach preventing deaths by suicide; and
- Acknowledges the school's role in providing an environment, which is sensitive to individual and societal factors that place youth at greater risk for suicide and one that helps to foster positive youth development.

### **Definitions**

***At risk:*** A student who is defined as high risk for suicide is one who has made a suicide attempt, has the intent to die by suicide, or has displayed a significant change in behavior suggesting the onset or deterioration of a mental health condition. The student may have thought about suicide including potential means of death and may have a plan. In addition, the student may exhibit feelings of isolation, hopelessness, helplessness, and the inability to tolerate any more pain. This situation would necessitate a referral, as documented in the following procedures.

***Crisis team:*** A multidisciplinary team of primarily administrative, mental health, safety professionals, and support staff whose primary focus is to address crisis preparedness, intervention/response and recovery. These professionals have been specifically trained in crisis preparedness through recovery and take the leadership role in developing crisis plans, ensuring school staff can effectively execute various crisis protocols, and may provide mental health services for effective crisis interventions and recovery supports.

***Mental health:*** A state of mental and emotional being that can impact choices and actions that affect wellness. Mental health problems include mental and substance use disorders.

***Postvention:*** Suicide postvention is a crisis intervention strategy designed to reduce the risk of suicide and suicide contagion, provide the support needed to help survivors cope with a suicide

death, address the social stigma associated with suicide, and disseminate factual information after the suicide death of a member of the school community.

**Risk assessment:** An evaluation of a student who may be at risk for suicide, conducted by the appropriate school staff (e.g., school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker). This assessment is designed to elicit information regarding the student's intent to die by suicide, previous history of suicide attempts, presence of a suicide plan, and its level of lethality and availability, presence of support systems, and level of hopelessness and helplessness, mental status, and other relevant risk factors.

**Risk factors for suicide:** Characteristics or conditions that increase the chance that a person may try to take his or her life. Suicide risk tends to be highest when someone has several risk factors at the same time. Risk factors may encompass biological, psychological, and or social factors in the individual, family, and environment.

**Self-harm:** Behavior that is self-directed and deliberately results in injury or the potential for injury to oneself. Can be categorized as either non-suicidal or suicidal. Although self-harm often lacks suicidal intent, youth who engage in self-harm are more likely to attempt suicide.

**Suicide:** Death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result of the behavior. Note: The coroner's or medical examiner's office must first confirm that the death was a suicide before any school official may state this as the cause of death.

**Suicide attempt:** A self-injurious behavior for which there is evidence that the person had at least some intent to kill himself/herself. A suicide attempt may result in death, injuries, or no injuries. A mixture of ambivalent feelings such as wish to die and desire to live is a common experience with most suicide attempts. Therefore, ambivalence is not a sign of a less serious or less dangerous suicide attempt.

**Suicidal behavior:** Suicide attempts, intentional injury to self associated with at least some level of intent, developing a plan or strategy for suicide, gathering the means for a suicide plan, or any other overt action, or thought indicating intent to end one's life.

**Suicide contagion:** The process by which suicidal behavior or a suicide influences an increase in the suicidal behaviors of others. Guilt, identification, and modeling are each thought to play a role in contagion. Although rare, suicide contagion can result in a cluster of suicides.

**Suicidal ideation:** Thinking about, considering, or planning for self-injurious behavior which may result in death. A desire to be dead without a plan or intent to end one's life is still considered suicidal ideation and should be taken seriously.

## **Scope**

This policy covers actions that take place in the school, on school property, at school-sponsored functions and activities, on school buses or vehicles, and at school sponsored out-of-school events where VOCS staff is present. This policy applies to the entire school community, including all VOCS staff, students, parents/guardians, and volunteers. This policy will also cover appropriate school responses to suicidal or high-risk behaviors that take place outside of the school environment.

## **Prevention**

***District Policy Implementation:*** The Executive Director shall designate a Suicide Prevention Coordinator. The Suicide Prevention Coordinator will be responsible for planning and coordinating implementation of this policy for VOCS. All staff members shall report students they believe to be at elevated risk for suicide to the school Suicide Prevention Coordinator.

***Staff Professional Development:*** All staff will receive annual professional development on risk factors, warning signs, protective factors, response procedures, referrals, postvention, and resources regarding youth suicide prevention. The professional development will include additional information regarding groups of students at elevated risk for suicide, including those living with mental and/or substance use disorders, those who engage in self-harm or have attempted suicide, those in out-of-home settings, those experiencing homelessness, American Indian/Alaska Native students, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students, students bereaved by suicide, and those with medical conditions or certain types of disabilities.

***Youth Suicide Prevention Programming:*** Developmentally appropriate, student-centered education materials will be integrated into the curriculum of all K-12 health classes. The content of these age-appropriate materials will include: 1) the importance of safe and healthy choices and coping strategies, 2) how to recognize risk factors and warning signs of mental disorders and suicide in oneself and others, 3) help-seeking strategies for oneself or others, including how to engage school resources and refer friends for help. In addition, schools may provide supplemental small-group suicide prevention programming for students.

***Publication and Distribution:*** This policy will be reviewed annually and available in its entirety on the school website. In addition, this policy will be referenced in both the teacher and parent/student handbooks.

## **Assessment and Referral**

When a student is identified by a VOCS staff member as potentially suicidal, for example, verbalizes about suicide, presents overt risk factors such as agitation or intoxication, the act of self-harm occurs, or a student self-refers, the student will be seen by a school mental health professional within the same school day to assess risk and facilitate referral. If there is no

mental health professional available, a school nurse, or an administrator will fill this role until a mental health professional can be brought in.

**For youth at risk:**

- VOCS staff will continuously supervise the student to ensure their safety.
- The Executive Director and the Suicide Prevention Coordinator will be made aware of the situation as soon as reasonably possible.
- The school mental health professional or Executive Director will contact the student's parent/guardian, as described in the Parental Notification and Involvement section, and will assist the family with an urgent referral. When appropriate, this may include calling emergency services or bringing the student to the local Emergency Department, but in most cases will involve setting up an outpatient mental health or primary care appointment and communicating the reason for referral to the healthcare provider.
- VOCS staff will ask the student's parent/guardian for written permission to discuss the student's health with outside care, if appropriate.

**In-School Suicide Attempts**

In the case of an in-school suicide attempt, the health and safety of the student is paramount. In these situations:

- First aid will be rendered until professional medical treatment and/or transportation can be received.
- VOCS staff will supervise the student to ensure their safety.
- VOCS staff will move all other students out of the immediate area as soon as possible.
- If appropriate, staff will immediately request a mental health assessment for the youth.
- The school mental health professional or Executive Director will contact the student's parent/guardian, as described in the Parental Notification and Involvement section.
- VOCS staff will immediately notify the Executive Director or the Suicide Prevention Coordinator regarding in-school suicide attempts.
- VOCS will engage as necessary the crisis team to assess whether additional steps should be taken to ensure student safety and well being.

**Re-Entry Procedure**

For students returning to school after a mental health crisis, a school mental health professional, the Executive Director, or designee will meet with the student's parent/guardian, and if appropriate, meet with the student to discuss re-entry and appropriate next steps to ensure the student's readiness for return to VOCS.

- A VOCS mental health professional or other designee will be identified to coordinate with the student, their parent/guardian, and any outside mental health care providers.

- The parent/guardian will provide documentation from a mental health care provider that the student has undergone examination and that they are no longer a danger to themselves or others.
- The designated staff person will periodically check in with student to help them readjust to the school community and address any ongoing concerns.

### **Out-Of-School Suicide Attempts**

If a VOCS staff member becomes aware of a suicide attempt by a student that is in progress in an out-of-school location, the staff member will:

- Call the police and/or emergency medical services, such as 911.
- Inform the student's parent/guardian.
- Inform the school Suicide Prevention Coordinator and Executive Director.

If the student contacts the staff member and expresses suicidal ideation, the staff member should maintain contact with the student (either in person, online, or on the phone). The staff member should then enlist the assistance of another person to contact the police while maintaining verbal engagement with the student.

### **Parental Notification and Involvement**

In situations where a student is assessed at risk for suicide or has made a suicide attempt, the student's parent/guardian will be informed as soon as practicable by the Executive Director, designee, or mental health professional. If the student has exhibited any kind of suicidal behavior, the parent/guardian should be counseled on "means restriction," limiting the child's access to mechanisms for carrying out a suicide attempt. Staff will also seek parental permission to communicate with outside mental health care providers regarding their child.

Through discussion with the student, the Executive Director, designee, or school mental health professional will assess whether there is further risk of harm due to parent/guardian notification. If the Executive Director, designee, or mental health professional believes, in their professional capacity, that contacting the parent/guardian would endanger the health or well-being of the student, they may delay such contact as appropriate. If contact is delayed, the reasons for the delay should be documented.

### **Postvention**

**Development and Implementation of an Action Plan:** The crisis team will develop an action plan to guide school response following a death by suicide. A meeting of the crisis team to implement the action plan should take place immediately following news of the suicide death. The action plan may include the following steps:

**Verify the death.** Staff will confirm the death and determine the cause of death through communication with the coroner's office, local hospital, the student's parent/guardian, or police department. Even when a case is perceived as being an obvious instance of suicide, it should not be labeled as such until after a cause of death ruling has been made. If the cause of death has been confirmed as suicide but the parent/guardian will not permit the cause of death to be disclosed, the school will not share the cause of death but will use the opportunity to discuss suicide prevention with students.

**Assess the situation.** The crisis team will meet to prepare the postvention response, to consider how severely the death is likely to affect other students, and to determine which students are most likely to be affected. The crisis team will also consider how recently other traumatic events have occurred within the school community and the time of year of the suicide. If the death occurred during a school vacation, the need for or scale of postvention activities may be reduced.

**Share information.** Before the death is officially classified as a suicide by the coroner's office, the death can and should be reported to staff, students, and parents/guardians with an acknowledgement that its cause is unknown. Inform the faculty that a sudden death has occurred, preferably in a staff meeting. Write a statement for staff members to share with students. The statement should include the basic facts of the death and known funeral arrangements (without providing details of the suicide method), recognition of the sorrow the news will cause, and information about the resources available to help students cope with their grief. The crisis team may prepare a letter (with the input and permission from the student's parent/guardian) to send home with students that includes facts about the death, information about what the school is doing to support students, the warning signs of suicidal behavior, and a list of resources available.

**Avoid suicide contagion.** Teachers need to be aware and sensitive to how other students react to the news of a suicide death, so that by sharing with students, it doesn't encourage other students to also consider suicide. The crisis team will work with teachers to identify students who are most likely to be significantly affected by the death. In the staff meeting, the crisis team will review suicide warning signs and procedures for reporting students who generate concern.

**Initiate support services.** Students identified as being more likely to be affected by the death will be assessed by a school mental health professional to determine the level of support needed. The crisis team will coordinate support services for students and staff in need of individual and small group counseling as needed. In concert with parents/guardians, crisis team members will refer to community mental health care providers to ensure a smooth transition from the crisis intervention phase to meeting underlying or ongoing mental health needs.

**Develop memorial plans.** The school should not create on-campus physical memorials (for example, photos or flowers), funeral services, or if applicable, fly the flag at half-mast because it may sensationalize the death and encourage suicide contagion. School should not be canceled

for the funeral. Any school-based memorials (for example, small gatherings) will include a focus on how to prevent future suicides and prevention resources available.

**External Communication:** The Executive Director or designee will be the sole media spokesperson. Staff will refer all inquiries from the media directly to the spokesperson. The spokesperson will:

- Keep the Suicide Prevention Coordinator and staff informed of the school actions relating to the death.
- Prepare a statement for the media including the facts of the death, postvention plans, and available resources. The statement will not include confidential information, speculation about victim motivation, means of suicide, or personal family information.
- Answer all media inquiries. If a suicide is to be reported by news media, the spokesperson should encourage reporters not to make it a front-page story, not to use pictures of the suicide victim, not to use the word suicide in the caption of the story, not to describe the method of suicide, and not to use the phrase “suicide epidemic” – as this may elevate the risk of suicide contagion. They should also be encouraged not to link bullying to suicide and not to speculate about the reason for suicide. Media should be asked to offer the community information on suicide risk factors, warning signs, and resources available.